`Political Correctness': the Politics of Culture and Language
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Discourse Society 2003; 14; 17
DOI: 10.1177/0957926503014001927

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ABSTRACT. In this article, I approach the controversy over ‘political correctness’ (PC) in terms of three questions: a socio-historical question, a theoretical question and a political question as follows. (1) Why this apparently increasing focus in politics on achieving social and political change through changing culture and changing language – what has happened socially that can explain the ‘cultural turn’ and the ‘language turn’ in politics, in social and political theory, and in other domains of social practice? (2) How are we to understand the relationships among culture, language and other elements of social life and social practices – how are we to understand the relationship between change in culture and language, and social change? (3) For those who are politically committed to substantive social and political change (whether on the right or on the left), what place can a politics centred around culture and language have in a political strategy which is to have some chance of success? The article concludes with a discussion of strategies and tactics for contesting critiques of ‘PC’.

KEY WORDS: culture, dialectics, discourse, political correctness

We might see the controversy around ‘political correctness’ (PC) as a political controversy in which both those who are labelled ‘PC’ and those who label them ‘PC’ are engaged in a politics that is focused upon representations, values and identities – in short, a ‘cultural politics’. An immediate caveat is that the homogeneity of ‘PCers’ (those who are labelled ‘PC’) is no more than a constructed homogeneity produced through the labelling, but I shall leave that until later. The objective on both sides is cultural change (in a sense of ‘culture’ I shall explain shortly) as a trigger for broader social change. This makes sense of the observation, which a number of commentators have made, that there is a sort of performative contradiction in critiques of ‘PC’ because they would seem themselves
to be instances of the sort of cultural politics which is the object of critique (see e.g. Cameron, 1995). Because changing culture is conceived on ‘both sides’ as partly a matter of changing language, the ‘PC’ controversy is partly, but only partly, a controversy over language. I shall focus here on the language aspect. It seems to me that in order to increase our understanding of what has been going on in the ‘PC’ controversy, as well as for those who see themselves as broadly committed to political change for the enhancement of social justice to learn tactically and strategically from it, there are several questions which need to be addressed.

1. A question about social history and social change in the socio-historical context of the ‘PC’ controversy: why this apparently increasing focus in politics on achieving social and political change through changing culture and changing language? What has happened socially that can explain the ‘cultural turn’ and the ‘language turn’ in politics, in social and political theory, and in other domains of social practice? (Section 1).

2. A question about theory: how are we to understand the relationship between culture, language and other elements of social life and social practices (including institutions and organizations, urban or industrial infrastructure, social relations)? How are we to understand the relationship between change in culture and language, and social change? (Section 2).

3. A question about political strategy and tactics: for those who are politically committed to substantive social and political change (whether on the right or on the left), what place can a politics centred around culture and language have in a political strategy which is to have some chance of success? (Section 3).

1. Socio-historical context: Society, culture and language

The question of the relationships and changing relationships among society, culture and language is a highly complex question to which I can give only rather summary attention in this article. I want to follow Williams (1981) in theorizing a culture as a ‘signifying system’ constituted as an articulation of representations, values and identities. Social analysis is concerned with the dialectical interrelations between signifying systems and other analytically separable systems (economic systems, political systems, kinship and family systems, etc.). I call these analytically separate because, although there are reasons for seeing them as different, they are not discrete, i.e. the relationship between them and signifying systems is dialectical in that for instance the economic system internalizes, enacts and inculcates (see Section 2 on theory) signifying systems. Necessarily so, because human beings are reflexive, there is always a dialectical interconnection between what they do and how they represent, value and identify themselves and what they do. Seeing cultures as signifying systems also helps clarify the relationship between culture and language: cultures exist as languages, or what I shall rather call discourses (and in their enactment as ‘cultural forms’ and inculcation as identities, as genres and styles – see Section 2). But cultures are not only
discourses, they are also systems and forms of consciousness, and they may be ideologies—again, neither excludes discourses, neither is discrete, but they are analytically different. Let us say that a particular form of social life is a particular networking of social practices (the ‘systems’ referred to in Williams’ terminology above) including particular articulations among culture, language (discourse) and other elements of social practices; and let us say that social change is a change in the networking of social practices and the articulation of elements.

This will have to suffice as a theoretical basis for approaching the question about social history and change. In broad terms, an increasing salience of culture and discourse in (an increasingly reflexive) social life is a feature of modernity, and perhaps especially of changes in social life over recent decades. The ‘cultural turn’ and the ‘language turn’ are first of all ‘turns’ in social life itself, and only secondarily turns in philosophy and social theory. Let me quickly review some more recent aspects and indications of this change. First, the ‘culture industries’, including broadcasting, have become increasingly important domains of social practice, and their networking with other domains of social practice (the economy, politics, family life, etc.) has become an increasingly significant feature of social life. Culture industries such as television are (as the term suggests) entities on an economic level as well as others, but they are specialized for ‘signifying systems’ in Williams’ terminology—and the representations, values and identities constructed in and projected and circulated through them are uncontroversially of increasing social significance. Other domains of social practice (e.g. politics, family life, community life) work more and more through the mediation of the culture industries, and cultural representations and values (and therefore the discourses which circulate through television and other media) play an increasingly salient role in the way in which politics, family life and so on, work.

Second, culture and discourse are increasingly significant in economic production and consumption. It is a truism that commodities are now consumed for their cultural or ‘sign’ value rather than just their ‘use’ value, and are accordingly produced as embodiments of cultural values and discourses, targeted with ever greater precision at culturally differentiated ‘niche markets’ (defined in terms of generation, gender, lifestyle, etc.). Another truism is that economies are increasingly ‘informational’ or ‘knowledge-based’ and ‘knowledge-driven’, which amounts to discourse-driven—driven for instance by shifting managerial discourses that come to be enacted as managerial systems in business and industry. By the same token, the knowledge, skills, aptitudes and attitudes of employees, their values and their identities, and therefore their (‘lifelong’) education and training, become a major concern for business.

There are other respects in which identities come to be an increasingly salient concern. Economic transformations have radically changed the social relations of work. The system of social classes defined primarily by social relations within economic production has lost its potency as the principle shaper of social identities and differences. The attachment of political parties and governments to particular social class interests has virtually disappeared. Governments are
instead in increasingly close ‘partnerships’ with business, and see a large part of their role as creating the financial, infrastructural and ‘human resources’ conditions for success in the highly competitive ‘global economy’. Education becomes a primary concern, but also forms of ‘cultural governance’, the formation and transformation of identities and values. Meanwhile, left politics, unable to respond to these social transformations and the ideological assault of the New Right and neo-liberalism with an effective counter-hegemonic strategy (Hall, 1994), has become fragmented. They are no longer centred upon the political parties and social classes but oriented to ‘single issues’ and to a politics of recognition, identity and difference as much as to a politics of re-distributive social justice.

This brief sketch has brought us to the point of entry of the controversy over ‘political correctness’, because as I indicated above this controversy is located within the shift to ‘cultural’ politics, the politics of recognition, identity and difference. The point of arriving at this politics by the rather circuitous route I have taken above, however, is that ‘PC’ needs, I believe, to be framed rather more broadly than it has generally been within the social transformations of recent decades. Cultural interventions directed at changing representations, values and identities, and (given the particular focus of this article) doing so in part through changing language (discourse), are actually pervasive in contemporary social life. They are pervasive in economic practices, in which the inculcation of employees into new ways of working and new identities corresponding to them, partly through attempts to get them to not only use but ‘own’ new discourses (some of the buzz-words are: ‘teams’, ‘networks’, ‘partnerships’, ‘flexibility’). They are pervasive in politics and in the mediation of politics through the press and broadcasting – as for instance Hall (1994) points out, the hegemonic projects of Reagan and Thatcher were orchestrated at different levels, and were partly projects for changing culture and discourse.

From this perspective, one striking feature of the ‘PC’ controversy is its narrow focus on one relatively small part of this pervasive process of cultural and discursive intervention. For one thing, as Hall (1994) points out, the left cultural politics which was labelled ‘PC’ by the right really took off during the Reagan–Thatcher era, which was characterized by substantial cultural and discursive interventions on the part of government. These were linked to the development and diffusion of a neo-liberal political agenda and political discourse especially on the part of New Right ‘think tanks’ (such as the Adam Smith Institute in the UK), which were closely linked to the Reagan and Thatcher governments. The ‘terrorism’ of feminists and anti-racists in, for instance, their attempts to gain institutional acceptance for guidelines for anti-racist and anti-sexist language use (see Section 3 of this article) seem small beer in comparison with the systematic diffusion and imposition of neo-liberal discourse through international organizations such as the World Bank and the OECD, and through the very media which were loudest in condemning ‘PC’.

Of course there are significant differences in forms of cultural and discursive
intervention, which can make it difficult to see the generality of the process. A primary target of critiques of ‘PC’ has been attempts by feminists, anti-racists and others to persuade organizations such as workplaces or universities to adopt guidelines which ask people to think about how they act and speak, to avoid certain behaviour and language (e.g. sexist language), and to adopt alternatives (the effects of these debates for feminists are discussed in Mills’ article in this issue). There are also considerable variations in what one might call the illocutionary stance of such activists (asking, urging, demanding), but what is going in such cases is an overt attempt to challenge and change individual behaviour and language. By contrast, the neo-liberal project to change identities, values and representations (e.g. to inculcate ‘flexibility’ and ‘individual responsibility’, or extend market identities such as ‘customer’ or ‘consumer’ to public services such as education) has mainly relied upon the covert power of systems (international agencies, national governments, media, business or public service organizations).

Let us come back to the question of the apparent performative contradiction in critiques of ‘PC’. Critics of ‘PC’ assemble together a diverse range of actions and interventions on the part of diverse groups of people (teachers, academics, feminist activists, etc.) within the category of ‘PC’, and sometimes refer to them collectively as if they constituted some sort of homogeneous social movement. It is easy enough to show that they do not, moreover, few of those identified as ‘PCers’ accept themselves to be such. ‘Political correctness’ and being ‘politically correct’ are, in the main, identifications imposed upon people by their political opponents. But this in itself is also a form of cultural politics, an intervention to change representations, values and identities as a way of achieving social change (Cameron, 1995). And it has relied primarily on the complicity of sections of the media.

The isolation of ‘PC’ from the more general process of cultural and discursive intervention has proved to be a remarkably effective way of disorienting sections of the left (see Section 3). At the same time, it has perhaps helped to divert attention from the more general, more pervasive, more profound and effective processes of cultural and discursive intervention referred to above. It is worth considering why critics of ‘PC’ readily say that it is ‘PC’ to suggest that adult females should be referred to as ‘women’ and not ‘girls’, but do not see it as ‘PC’ when ‘bank accounts’ are re-labelled as ‘financial products’. This re-labelling is certainly prescriptive for bank employees, and imposed on customers, and in that sense has to do with what is ‘correct’. But I imagine it is not generally seen as ‘political’. The critique of ‘PC’ assumes a liberal separation between the ‘political’ and the ‘economic’, whereas from the perspective of political economy the ‘economic’ is ‘political’ (Sayer, 1995) – the generalization of markets and the commodity form to finance, to public services, and indeed to most of contemporary social life which such re-labelling is a part of is an eminently ‘political’ change.

2. Theory: Language, social practices, and social change

Let me turn to the theoretical question, which I have already begun to address in
Section 1. How are we to understand the relationships among culture, language and other elements of social life and social practices (including institutions and organizations, urban or industrial infrastructure, social relations)? How are we to understand the relationship between change in culture and language, and social change?

I suggested above that a particular form of social life is a particular networking of social practices including particular articulations among culture, language and other elements of social practices; and that social change is a change in the networking of social practices and the articulation of elements. A social practice (e.g. commodity advertising, secondary education) is an articulation of analytically different elements which are not, however, discrete but dialectically interconnected such that each internalizes the others (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2000; Harvey, 1996). Let us say that the analytically different elements are:

- activities;
- subjects (endowed with representations, knowledge, beliefs, values, purposes, attitudes);
- social relations;
- instruments;
- objects;
- time and place;
- discourse.

Social practices are inherently reflexive – people interact, and at the same time they represent to themselves and each other what they do (sometimes drawing upon representations of what they do which come from other practices, including governmental and ‘expert’ practices). What they do is then shaped and re-shaped by their representations of what they do. We can understand the dialectical internalization of discourse within other elements in these terms: activities for instance are enactments of discourses (e.g. the way a teacher teaches is an enactment of particular representations, particular discourses, of teaching – maybe even developed ‘theories’ of teaching).

This perspective is the basis of theories of social constructionism – theories of social life as socially (discursively) constructed as an effect of discourses. Such ‘discourse theory’ has helped shape the forms of cultural politics that have been labelled as ‘PC’. Processes of cultural and discursive intervention, including what is referred to as ‘PC’, can be seen in these terms as attempts to change discourses on the assumption that changing discourses will, or may, lead to changes in other elements of social practices through processes of dialectical internalization. For instance, if people can be persuaded to talk of ‘partner’ rather than ‘the person I’m living with’ or ‘lover’ (or even ‘mistress’), or if people being ‘sacked’ is partly displaced in public discourse by organizations ‘downsizing’, there will (or may) be consequential changes in how non-marital relationships and economic restructuring are perceived, and how people act and react towards them. Changes
of discourse are not merely re-labellings but shifts to different spheres of values. In the case of ‘partner’, this involves a shift for some people to the values of business relationships, which has made the term uncomfortable even for many who use it; in the case of ‘downsizing’ there is a shift to the values of a particular form of economics. Part of the controversy over ‘PC’ is attributable to often implicit differences between those who assume some form of ‘discourse theory’, which implies that representations are always positioned, value-laden and chosen against alternative representations. This compares with those who assume a transparent and direct relationship between what is said/written and ‘the language’, without the mediating level of discourse (Cameron, 1995).

However, one has to be cautious about how one understands social (discursive) constructionism. First, the dialectical internalization also works ‘the other way round’, which amounts to saying that discourses do not come out of nowhere. Second, the internalization of discourses in other elements of social practices (including their physical–material elements, e.g. the plant and machinery of an industry) is a conditioned and contingent process. To see why this is so, we need to look more closely at the dialectics of discourse.

Let me distinguish among three principle ways in which discourse figures in social practices. It figures firstly as discourses (note the distinction between ‘discourse’ as an abstract noun and as a count noun – the latter is just one aspect of the former). Discourses are positioned representations (including reflexive self-representations of social practices) – positioned in the sense that different positions in the social relations of a social practice tend to give rise to different representations. Secondly, it figures as genres – ways of acting and interacting in their discourse (more broadly: semiotic) aspect. For instance, interviewing, lecturing and conversing are genres. Thirdly, it figures as styles – ways of being, identities, in their discourse (semiotic) aspect. For instance, there are various ways of being a political leader or a manager, which are partly bodily and partly discursive.

With these distinctions in mind, let us turn to the dialectics of discourse. Discourses include not only representations of how things are, they can also be representations of how things could be, or ‘imaginaries’. They can represent or imagine interconnected webs of activities, instruments, objects, subjects in social relations, times and places, values, etc. As imaginaries, they may come to be enacted as actual webs of activities, subjects, times and places, values, etc. – they can become actual ways of acting and interacting. Such enactments include genres – the dialectical enactment of discourses is partly a movement within the discursive/semiotic moment/element of social practices, and partly a movement between this moment/element and others. They may also come to be inculcated as new ways of being, new identities – including new styles (but also new bodily behaviours).

‘May’ is crucially important: what I am suggesting is a moderate form of ‘social constructivism’ (Sayer, 2000) which recognizes that discourses may construct and reconstruct social practices, social structures and social life, but which also
recognizes that there are no guarantees of such constructive effects – the sedimentation of institutions and the habituses of people may make them resistant. The general point here is that a dialectical view of social practices should also include a recognition of the formation of (relative) permanences, which may limit the dialectical flow between elements (Harvey, 1996). These relative permanences are of two main types. First, the relative permanence of institutions, organizations, networks of practices, structures. The point is a rather obvious one: structures and institutions develop internal rigidities that can make them resistant to any form of change and resistant, in particular, to cultural and discursive change. Second, the relative permanence of habituses. The habitus of a person (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) is a set of dispositions, stances, know-hows, and so forth (discursive and non-discursive), which develops over time and can also be resistant to change. The conclusion, which I elaborate in political terms in Section 3, is that the socially constructive effects of discourses are contingent upon the resistances of structures and habituses.

3. Political strategy and tactics: The politics of culture and language

Let me turn now to the third question, about political strategy and tactics. For those who are politically committed to substantive social and political change (whether on the right or on the left), what place can a politics centred around culture and language have in a political strategy which is to have some chance of success?

Let me approach this issue via another question: why is it that the critique of ‘PC’ has been so successful? Why is it that it has divided the left, and confused and disoriented some sections of it? Why is it that labelling one’s opponents as ‘PC’ has proved to be such a durable tactic, still widely resorted to (e.g. by the current and previous leaders of the British Conservative Party, Iain Duncan-Smith and William Hague) presumably because it is seen as still effective? Was it perhaps because the critiques of ‘PC’ have a real target to shoot at, that there is something really problematic about the forms of cultural politics which were the primary target?

That is the view of Hall (1994), whose critique I broadly subscribe to, although I think he is wrong to himself refer to the cultural politics he is critiquing as ‘PC’. Hall locates the ‘PC’ controversy in Britain within the aftermath of the Thatcher government’s abolition of the Greater London Council (GLC), whose leader was Ken Livingstone, now Mayor of London. Hall sees the GLC as having been an incipient left counter-hegemonic project to the hegemonic project of Thatcherism, successfully bringing together the cultural politics of the new social movements (anti-racism, feminism, etc.) with more traditional left politics based on the trade unions and the labour movement. The political and especially media offensive against the ‘loony left’ GLC was, as Hall points out, a critique of ‘PC’ avant la lettre. With the demise of the GLC, the constituents of the alliance around
it became fragmented, and some engaged in what Hall sees as a voluntarist form of ‘vanguardist’ cultural politics centring upon ‘PC’ – it lost any sense of the need for a strategic, counter-hegemonic, dimension. Hall is careful to distinguish between the validity of a cultural politics focused upon a critique of language in the construction of social identities and differences, and the vanguardist way in which this politics was pursued – its attempt to police language and behaviour, an ultra-left politics of ‘demands’. Having said that, the danger of people on the left, such as Hall, using the label ‘PC’ (see also Eagleton, 2000: 89) is that it fails to recognize that the differentiation he is seeking to make within left politics’ tactics and strategies are fudged over in the critique of ‘PC’ – his own more cautious cultural and discursive interventions are just as likely to be critiqued as ‘PC’.

Critics of ‘PC’ had a plausible target because some (but only some) of the forms of cultural and discursive intervention labelled as ‘PC’ smacked of the arrogance, self-righteousness and puritanism of an ultra-left politics, and have caused widespread resentment even among people basically committed to anti-racism, anti-sexism, etc. I recall, for instance, a discussion with a respected political activist some years ago after a political meeting in which the debate was interrupted by what he saw as self-righteous, holier-than-thou, hectoring, which fetishized a rather minor matter of wording (someone referred to the chair as ‘Mr Chairman’) that was irrelevant to the point at issue, and was damaging to the meeting as a political event. My impression is that such reactions were common. It is true, as critics of the critique of ‘PC’ have often pointed out, that some of the favourite chestnuts were apocryphal (e.g. ‘coffee without milk’ instead of ‘black coffee’), but nevertheless the resonance which these critiques have had indicates that they did connect with people’s experiences. The critiques are certainly reactionary, they certainly depend upon a spurious construct called ‘PC’, they isolate one form of cultural and discursal intervention from other forms, but like most successful ideologies they contain a partial truth.

What follows from all this is that if the politics of culture and language are to work as part of a political strategy with some prospect of success, they have to be integrated within a politics of structures and habituses – a hegemonic politics, in Hall’s terms, which brings together interventions at various levels of the social. For example, not focusing on sexist or racist language use in an organization through non-sexist/non-racist guidelines *in isolation from* other potentially discriminatory aspects of the social relations of the organization, such as salary differentials or procedures for promotion. The right has understood this better than the left, though some on the left (still branded within the catch-all ideological category of ‘PC’) have understood it too. Neo-liberal and New Right politics have targeted structures and institutions, educational systems (and thereby the formation of habituses), as well as cultural representations, values and identities. That in itself is no guarantee of success, and there are manifestly resistances both to enactment and inculcation of neo-liberal discourses. Moreover, relatively successful enactment does not guarantee relatively successful inculcation: there
is a stage short of inculcation at which people may acquiesce to new discourses without accepting them – they may mouth them rhetorically, for strategic and instrumental purposes, as happens, for instance, with market discourse in public services such as education.

4. Conclusion

The editorial in the British daily newspaper *The Mail* on 11 April 2000 was headlined ‘Deplorable bid to stifle debate,’ and attacked the ‘liberal fascism’ of the Liberal Democrats for their complaint to the Commission for Racial Equality about the language of both Labour and Conservatives in public statements about people seeking political asylum in Britain. A focus of debate was asylum seekers being described as ‘bogus’. The *Sun* editorial on the same day, under the heading ‘Bogus issue’, said: ‘What a sad commentary on this PC-obsessed country that, instead of confronting the problem head on, we are talking about the “right language” to use!’ It also says: ‘There IS a flood of illegal immigrants . . . The majority ARE bogus’ and ‘The issue has nothing to do with race.’

The controversy over political asylum in Britain during the past couple of years is an example of the apparent continuing effectiveness of the strategy of wheeling out charges of ‘PC’ against political opponents. But how might those who are committed to more socially just policies towards refugees as well as ‘economic migrants’ respond to this strategy, both tactically in particular instances like this, and strategically in aiming in the long run to make the strategy ineffective? And how might discourse analysts and sociolinguists contribute? These are big issues which I can only touch upon here.

Strategically, critics of globalization, neo-liberalism and more specific aspects of them such as policies on migration lack, as Hall (1994) points out, a hegemonic strategy. There is a widespread understanding that the emerging socio-economic order is deeply problematic, that, for instance, large business corporations have too much power and elected governments have too little power, that the advocacy of ‘liberalization’ in the free movement of money and goods stands in stark contrast to the harsh restrictions on the movement of people. Yet, so far, there is no coherent alternative vision of a social order which can attract the support and conviction that might lead to a hegemonic strategy. Whether and when such a strategy will emerge we cannot know. But one of its pre-conditions is better theory and analysis.

There is clearly a need for a better theoretical understanding of the ‘PC’ controversy on, broadly, the left. Discourse analysts and sociolinguists can contribute through researching and theorizing the ‘PC’ controversy, and seeking ways to bring their perspectives into the political debates. What is missing on the left is a general understanding of the significance and nature of cultural and linguistic interventions in the transformations of contemporary social life. We need a balanced view of the importance of language in social change and politics, which avoids a linguistic vanguardism as well as dismissing questions about language as
trivial, and an incorporation of a politics of language within political strategies and tactics.

What does this imply tactically for responding to the critique of ‘PC’ in contexts such as the controversy over political asylum? First, that this particular issue be contextualized within contemporary patterns of migration, analysis of the causes of migration, including analysis of how pressures towards migration are produced through the damaging effects of the contemporary neo-liberal ‘global’ restructuring on the economic, political and social fabric of the poorer countries and regions of the world. Second, that the role of governments, politics and the media in legitimizing the restructuring, in (as Bourdieu, 1998, puts it) clearing away obstacles to the restructuring be placed upon the political agenda, and be related to specific issues such as political asylum and immigration policy. Third, that the importance of language, of discourse, in both the restructuring and its legitimation with respect to particular issues like this one, become a matter for political debate. And fourth, that the strategic use of the critique of ‘PC’ in reducing and mystifying the linguistic and discoursal aspects of re-structur ing and legitimation, and as an instrument of political struggle, also become a matter for political debate within this wider frame.

Of course, none of this is easy. But ‘PC’ needs to be addressed seriously by the left, because the critique of ‘PC’ remains an effective and damaging strategy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Phil Graham (University of Queensland) and Sally Johnson (Lancaster University) for helpful comments on a draft of this article.

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